

PM's UAE visit shows importance of diplomacy, sovereignty

IN my 24 years of service with the Foreign Ministry, I have never come across a diplomatic incident like that which happened during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob's visit to the United Arab Emirates.

The visit was marred by the fact that the prime minister and his delegation were not accorded the usual diplomatic protocol and ceremonies demanded by a visit of such a nature.

The fact that several Malaysian embassy officers there were recalled to Kuala Lumpur soon after has rattled the nerves of diplomatic officers at home.

Diplomats need to think fast and get out of trouble every time something like what has been described

above occurs.

They have to know when diplomacy ends and when sovereignty begins.

While the former refers to the ability of diplomats to conduct bilateral relations between two countries, the latter takes into consideration the authority given to diplomats by the sending country to enable them to make decisions to move forward on an issue.

Most of the time, one's good judgment may be called for, or else, as most diplomats do, they will wait for word from the Foreign Ministry before deciding on the next course of action.

Often, this comes when it is too late to do anything.

As what follows relates to the above incident and its aftermath, one can picture three scenarios to help us to explain the reasons for its occurrence.

In the first scenario as described above, diplomacy will prevail.

In the second case, where sovereignty is involved, all that is needed is the authority given by the ministry for diplomats to act.

In the third scenario, the assumption is that for the two above scenarios to work together, sovereignty must always hold sway over diplomacy.

However, the practice today has been, and to avoid a diplomatic faux pas, diplomats on the ground have the right to exercise their own judgment to deal with issues.

At times, these decisions may exceed the original authority extended to diplomats.

In such a scenario, diplomatic understanding is called for from both sides to deal with a prime minister's "surprise" visit.

For instance, to a foreign country, despite having been advised that if such a visit were to take place, no formal protocol would be accorded by the receiving government on the PM's arrival.

At the airport, only embassy officials were on hand to welcome the prime minister and his delegation.

As it turned out, the host government did manage to extend assistance and courtesies to the prime

minister and his delegation to enable them to meet receiving government officials without much fuss.

They could also visit other venues and take part in activities in the city without a problem.

We can conclude from the above that the receiving government has succeeded in exercising diplomatic understanding to smooth things over.

The courtesies extended by the UAE government to make the visit an eventful one have much to say about the goods relations between the two countries.

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